

ENTREPRENEUR & INVESTOR

Creating and Living the Life You Desire

The Brave New World of Healthy Workplace Conflict

By Tania Coke
September 11, 2018



If your organisation is entirely free from workplace conflict, then this article is not for you. If, on the other hand, you are aware of conflicts of interest, disputes or disagreements arising in your organisation, then read on. In this article, we invite you to reflect on the way such disagreements are handled in your organisation and to consider whether there might be a better way to handle them, leading to healthier outcomes for all the individuals involved, as well as the organisation as a whole.

To begin with, cast your mind back to the last important team meeting you had. It may have been a board meeting or senior management team meeting, for instance. In that meeting, can you remember a moment when two or more people disagreed on a significant point? When the disagreement became evident, how did you personally feel? How did you react? Did you say or do anything? And how do you think the people around you felt? How did they react? Looking at the bigger picture, what has been the longer-term effect of this incident on the people involved, their relationships with one another and on the finances and performance of the organisation?

The benefit of hindsight

Now replay the meeting in your mind, but this time imagine the difficult conversation unfolding in what you think would have been a more ideal way. For instance, perhaps there was a moment when you vehemently disagreed with what someone said, but you didn't do or say anything about it. With the benefit of hindsight, you think you should have picked up on the point and expressed your own, different opinion. Or maybe you did express yourself, but in a way that in retrospect you think was unhelpful. Looking back at the incident, you feel that you could have reacted in a more constructive way. Perhaps you think you should have first asked the other person to explain what they meant, before expressing your own opinion. Or maybe you think it would have been most helpful to repeat back what you heard them say and ask if you had understood correctly.

Having reimagined the scene, now consider what might have been the longer-term effect of the incident, had it unfolded in this way. A conversation which in reality dampened the team's productivity, reduced profitability and left a sour taste in everyone's mouth, might instead have helped to open people's minds to new ways of thinking, built mutual respect and understanding, unlocked creativity and boosted productivity and profit. In other words, under certain circumstances, conflict can lead to a downward spiral of stress, bitterness and financial loss. However, if handled differently, it can actually be a force for good.

Multiple choices

Of course, we cannot know for sure what the outcome of an imaginary courageous conversation would have been. The point is that, in any situation, we have many choices about how to express ourselves and how to react to others. Each choice will lead to a different outcome. The more aware we are of our power to control our behaviour, and the more we exercise this power through conscious choice, the more chance we have of converting conflict into something healthy and positive.

One of the challenges we face in doing this is *habit*. We tend to develop habitual ways of responding to conflict. By repeatedly responding in a certain way, we end up trapped and find it difficult to break out into other types of responses. Another reason why it is difficult to respond to conflict in a healthy way is that conflict can trigger emotional and physical reactions that sabotage our better selves. With the luxury of hindsight, it is easy to imagine a healthy way to respond to conflict. But in the heat of the moment, as the blood rises to our head, and feelings of rage, guilt or self-pity flood our senses, we end up behaving in ways we later regret.

Through conflict resolution and mediation training we can tackle these challenges and transform the way we respond to conflict. By studying theories and frameworks such as the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, we can gain awareness of new ways of handling conflict conversations. Through role-play, we can try out these unfamiliar behaviours in a low-risk, learning environment. Role-play can also help to build empathy towards people who respond to conflict in different ways from us. A good trainer, workplace mediator or conflict coach can also encourage us to build helpful habits, such as taking time after difficult meetings to reflect on what happened, and imagine different ways we could have behaved, in order to bring about a better outcome.

The bottom line is that we each have the power to choose how we respond to conflict, and by exercising that power, we can convert conflict into a healthy part of organisational life.